

Corps told to change course on river plan

By [Bill Lambrecht](#),
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WASHINGTON - Under pressure from Missourians, the Army has ordered its Corps of Engineers to scrap plans to endorse flow changes in the Missouri River to rescue endangered species, according to sources.

Instead, the Army directed the Corps this week simply to present a list of alternatives for managing the river when the Corps issues a long-awaited report this month.

The Army intervention prevents the Corps from putting its weight behind the controversial flow changes in the last stages of a decade-long battle over dam operations and river health.

The new marching orders surprised the Corps and provided at least a temporary victory to Sen. Christopher "Kit" Bond and other Missouri political leaders in their bipartisan campaign to block the flow changes.

Missourians worry that a "spring rise" in the river could cause floods and that an accompanying summer drawdown in the water level by several feet would threaten water supplies.

An aide to Bond characterized the shift in plans as an important development. "Like the river, things appear to be moving along nicely," said the aide, who requested anonymity.

The shift is a setback to environmental advocates and to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which has pushed the Corps for more than a decade to alter the river's flow.

While the Army's decision doesn't sink the river restoration plan, it muddies the waters at a critical time and suggests that the administration of President George W. Bush ultimately might be persuaded to act decisively to prevent flow changes.

"If the Army decides to go this route, we could be back to square one in a lot of respects after 12 years of work," said Mike Olson, a Fish and Wildlife Service official.

Officials at both the Pentagon and the Corps of Engineers headquarters declined to discuss the pending shift.

Col. Eugene Pawlik, a corps public affairs officer in Washington, said only that "there is a lot of discussion back and forth. ... My perception is that we're relatively close to having something ready to announce."

But sources in both the Corps and Congress said that the Army already had issued

instructions for the Corps to back off and change course.

As a result, the Corps will be prevented from announcing a so-called preferred alternative on Aug. 31 when it issues a voluminous study of the environmental impacts of changing the river's flow.

Just two weeks ago, Corps officials in the field said publicly that they were leaning toward supporting a modest flow-change plan that had been put forth in a series of recommendations from the Fish and Wildlife Service.

The flow changes are intended to begin restoring the river's natural conditions that existed before it was dammed and altered for barges. The ebb-and-flow from dams would be beneficial to endangered wildlife and, as a result, enable the corps to avoid pending lawsuits alleging that it has violated the Endangered Species Act with its dam operations.

Under its new orders, the Corps now will offer only a series of options for saving endangered species - options that include conservation initiatives and various combinations of spring and summer flow changes. Perhaps no flow changes at all will be offered.

A Corps recommendation was considered important for another reason: It would have been the starting point in public hearings on the Missouri River beginning in October during a public comment period before the corps finalizes its new dam- operation manual next year.

Jay Carson, spokesman for Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle, D-S.D., said that the Corps would end up in court if it shirks responsibility for rescuing endangered species. Daschle supports the flow changes.

"If the Corps tries to duck that responsibility, it's not going to be a good situation, and that's what appears to be happening now," Carson said.

Chad Smith, Midwest representative of the advocacy group American Rivers, accused the Corps of breaking a promise to take a leadership role on the issue.

"If they do not come out with a preferred alternative, what they have been saying all along has been hot air. Seemingly, this is happening because one senator in one state is telling them what to do," he said.